Interviewee: Osmund "Ossie" Olson
Interviewer: Thomas Saylor
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Location: the Olson home in St. Paul, MN
Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, October 2002
Edited by: Thomas Saylor, December 2002

Ossie Olson was born 21 August 1923 in Warroad, Roseau County, in far northern Minnesota. The youngest son of Norwegian immigrant parents, Ossie attended schools in Warroad and graduated from Warroad High School in 1942. He was working a factory job in St. Paul when in February 1943 he received his induction notice for military service.

Drafted into the US Army Air Corps, after Basic Training Ossie ended up in the Signal Corps. He spent time in training at Camp Crowder, Missouri, and then worked stateside in telephone installation and repair. In 1944 Ossie, who had suffered from polio as a child that left him with decreased use of his legs, was re-assigned when he could no longer manage difficult climbing duties. He ended up in training as a tail gunner for B-17 Flying Fortress heavy bombers, and in April 1945 was shipped overseas to an US Eighth Air Force base near London. Although the war was drawing to a close, Ossie flew several missions over Germany before V-E Day in May 1945. He returned to the US in August 1945 and was discharged in January 1946 with the rank of sergeant.

A civilian again, Ossie got married (wife Mildreth Nelson), settled in St. Paul, and raised a family. He worked as a cabinet maker, and for many years was part owner of Pre-Hung Door of Eagan, Minnesota. He retired in 1986.

Ossie Olson passed away on 6 January 2009.

<u>Interview Key</u>:
T = Thomas Saylor
O = Osmund Olson
[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation
(***) = words or phrase unclear
NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity

Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.
Gap in tape: actual interview begins at counter 043.

O: Back then there were no jobs available. There was no industry or anything in Warroad. Basically farming and fishing were the big industries there. Without some businesses, why… But the way it is now, they've got two big manufacturing plants there that hire from all of Warroad and Rosseau and Swift and Baudette and all those little towns around. They've got Marvin Windows and Pearson Brothers Hockey Sticks, and it's a growing little town.

T: So it's doing better now that it was when you lived there, it sounds like.

O: Oh, yes, much better. Yes.

T: Do you ever sort of wish over the years that you'd stayed around or are you happy here in St. Paul?

O: I'm happy here. I've enjoyed my life here and I think I've faired very well. Kept my head above water. That's the bottom line.

T: Were you living at home with your folks when you went to high school?

O: Yes.

T: Do you remember how your folks reacted to that news about Pearl Harbor?

O: Not right off, no. My dad wasn't one to show much excitement or any emotion or anything toward that kind of stuff. He more or less kept it to himself if he had a feeling. He never explained anything to me or discussed anything.

T: Your dad and mom were both from Norway, is that right?

O: Yes.

T: When did they come over to the States?

O: It had to be, I was born in 1924, so it had to be around 1920.

T: So they were pretty recent immigrants to the States.

O: Oh, yes.

T: Did you grow up speaking Norwegian or English at home?

O: My dad never spoke Norwegian at home. He spoke English. It was a little broken to start with, but he mastered it.

T: So you didn't hear Norwegian growing up?

O: No.

T: Did your folks speak Norwegian to each other?

O: Not when us kids were around.

T: How about among your friends? People at school. Do you remember talking with friends or people in town about gosh, we're at war now?

O: Like I said, since my operation my memory isn't that good. Right off the top I don't remember any talking about it at all other than making sure you were registered and got your name on the books.

T: So when you turned eighteen you had to register for the draft.

O: Yes.

T: Now you told me before we started the tape that you'd had polio as a child. Is that right?

O: Yes.

T: Did that change your draft classification at all?

O: Not a bit. They didn't notice it, look at it or mention it. I went through at 1-A.

T: You were 1-A. What kind, if I can ask on tape, what kind of effects did you have of the polio from when you were a child?

O: My feet are crippled. I wear a seven triple E [size 7-EEE] shoe. The muscle in my left leg is about three-quarters of an inch shorter than the right one. Then when that second time I had it I lost the sense completely in my right thumb.

T: And yet you were still 1-A?

O: Yes. I was warm. *(laughs)*

T: That's all it took in 1943, wasn't it? And indeed it was the beginning of 1943 that you were inducted into the service. Do you remember getting the letter saying to report?

(1, A, 114)

O: Yes. I was here in St. Paul at the time. I had a job. I had to leave that and head for home, because my induction was going through Roseau County. I had to be back up there.

T: What were you doing in St. Paul at that time?

O: Just a regular labor job with a company over on Fairview Avenue, a big company right on the corner there. I can't even remember the name of it now, but it's changed names and changed industries in there over the years.

T: So you were one of these young people that after high school got out of Warroad and came down to the Twin Cities.

O: Yes.

T: But you got your draft notice and you had to go all the way back up there, and then all the way back to Fort Snelling [in Minneapolis] to be inducted?

O: We had to go through Roseau County. Then they shipped us up here [to Ft. Snelling].

T: So you made a round trip, didn't you?

O: Yes. That's the only way they can keep track of you.

T: Yes, I guess. How did you feel when you got that letter saying it was time to report?

O: I suppose there was a little excitement and a little uneasiness as to what was going to happen. A little different feeling. You just kind of had to play it by ear. Go with the flow, I guess. I made it all right.

T: Had you considered enlisting before you were drafted?

O: No, no. I didn't have time. I just turned eighteen when I graduated. I never thought of that.

T: You were drafted into the Army Air Corps, is that right?

O: Yes.

T: What can you recall about Basic Training?

O: That's one thing my mind won't remember. I thought a lot of times I wasn't going to be able to keep up. But I managed and I got through it all right. I was glad when I got through. Then they shipped me to Camp Crowder. In Missouri.

T: You were one of four children. Were you the only one of your brothers and sisters to serve?

O: No, my brother was a year older than me. He was in the service.

T: Was he already in by the time you went in?

O: You know, I don't remember. I don't think he was. He had a job here in town. He was up here in St. Paul too. He had a job that he was eliminated from the draft.

T: You mean deferred?

O: Deferred, yes. Then I was gone, so I don't really know exactly how long after I left that his deferment expired.

T: You were the first one of your family to go in?

O: Yes. I had two sisters.

T: How did your folks react to you going off to the service, getting your letter?

O: They didn't show any emotion or anything. They wished me God's blessing and hoped that everything would turn out all right.

T: Was it hard to leave home?

O: I had already been up here [in St Paul]. I had left home. It was a new experience, that's for sure. Being a small town boy and then all of a sudden being shipped out of the state. It was a new experience.

T: Good experience?

O: Any time you're learning something I think it's an experience that's good for you. You're seeing the country and they're teaching you things that can help you. I kind of think I enjoyed the Basic Training, because I was able to do things with the rest of them that I didn't think I would be able to handle.

T: So it was good for your self-confidence in a way.

O: Yes, right.

T: After Basic Training you were to be part of the Signal Corps. What exactly were you trained for there?

O: Anything to do with the telephone. There was repair, installations and running wires, hook ups. Just about anything. To get the telephone working at the desk. If it went haywire you had to know how to repair it, how to find the problem and… That was at Camp Crowder.

T: Did you then work at that job stateside?

O: No. No, I didn't. Part of the installation, part of the project was running the wires. They had to come from the pole outside to get to the office or whatever you were hooking it to and they had me climbing poles. My leg being polio bound, I couldn't take it. That's when I asked to be transferred to gunnery.

T: Did you select gunnery, or did you ask to be transferred out of the Signal Corps?

O: No, I selected the gunnery.

T: What prompted you to take that?

O: When I was a kid, that was the one thing I enjoyed. My uncle used to take me hunting and being able to take the gun and shoot, I got enjoyment out of that. So I thought, well, I'll try that.

T: You were in the Air Corps already so…

O: Yes.

T: That wouldn't have involved a lot of walking or moving up and down with your legs too.

O: No.

T: That was a good place to be. You moved on the Gunnery School and where was that?

(1, A, 203)

O: Las Vegas, Nevada.

T: That's a different kind of place too.

O: Yes.

T: What did you think of Las Vegas?

O: There wasn't much there then. That's sixty years ago. There wasn't much there. I've been there a few times since then.

T: It probably looked a whole lot different.

O: Yes. Help support them.

T: What was the training like in Gunnery School? How did one learn to be a gunner?

O: I didn't have that much trouble because I had handled a gun before, but a lot of them had to be taught how to aim and how to figure the distance and all that. Being with my uncle out in the woods and knowing how to handle a gun and shoot I didn't have that much trouble. It was just taking a big fifty-caliber machine gun and being able to tear it down and repair it if it got blocked up or something happened. If a shell got crossways or something. To be able to clean that out within seconds of time so you don't lose any time on it. Other than that I didn't seem to have any problem. I got pretty high marks in my shooting average, in marksmanship.

T: Did you do practice missions where you had to actually shoot at moving targets?

O: Yes. We had B-17s and they would have another very different plane would pull a flag behind them. We'd have colored bullets and we'd shoot at that white flag, that long streamer. Your bullet would leave a color in the streamer. Then when they got down they'd count how many, if I was shooting yellow bullets, they'd count how many yellow shots were on there.

T: They could tell how accurate you were.

O: Yes.

T: Were you at this point already a tail gunner, and practicing for that?

O: Yes.

T: How did they, because there's lots of different, there's ball turret gunners, there's waist gunners, how did you end up in the tail?

O: Choice.

T: You wanted that? How come?

O: I don't know. It just kind of appealed to me. I didn't like the waist gunner. You're standing up, and that was harder on my legs too, to stand all the time and keep my balance, especially with the movement of the plane. The other gunner crawled up in the top turret, and in the ball turret, he was cramped more than I was. That was just a… I decided I liked the tail. I practiced in the tail during training, and enjoyed it.

T: You saw the war backwards in a sense, didn't you? I mean everyone else was flying forwards. What kind of perspective is that, seeing everything out the back window?

O: I don't know. Actually you got windows about, they come back as far as your shoulders, so you can look both ways. You can see, if I turn my head this way *(looks over left shoulder)* I can see the wings of the plane there and the wing on the plane over here.

T: So looking right or left you can see the wing.

O: Yes, that's as far as I can see. So if anything is coming from that way you get a… I can't shoot because I don't have that much swivel with the gun.

T: How much swivel did you have with those guns?

O: Not that much. It was probably maybe fifteen, twenty degrees each way.

T: Like to one o'clock or eleven o'clock?

O: Yes.

T: Did it swivel up and down as well?

O: Yes. That way you had more movement than sideways.

T: On the tape, can you describe the space that you sat in back there?

O: You can figure putting a little stool probably a foot long and maybe a foot and a half high. Enough room to sit, and then right in front of that, that's all the room you would have there. Your armor plate would drop right in front of you. It would be just wide enough so you could reach your arm around it and get ahold of your guns and operate them.

T: So you had armor plating in front. How much room did you have from side to side?

O: A little more than elbow room, because you had your shells on both sides.

T: Feeding the fifty caliber shells to the guns?

O: Yes. So that was actually kind of protection from shrapnel or whatever, because if they go off the bullets were all facing out. It wouldn't be in the back coming in. Just going out. That would be on both sides. It was like protection there. They'd come into your guns. That was about all the room. I wouldn't say much more room than I have in this chair *(reclining armchair)*.

(1, A, 278)

T: How about headroom? Did you have to crouch, or was there enough?

O: No. There was enough head space. One reason for that is that you're sitting down. You couldn't stand up in there. But sitting on your little stool, then you were fine.

T: Was the glass that you had bulletproof glass?

O: No. I don't think they had bulletproof back then.

T: So you had armor in front and something to the side but that was it.

O: Yes.

T: Was it claustrophobic feeling?

O: No. No. I never had that feeling.

T: It sounds like it would have been more claustrophobic in that ball turret where you were kind of…

O: I would think there, too.

T: So you did pretty well in Gunnery School and you kind of liked your job?

O: Yes.

T: From Las Vegas you were posted overseas, is that right?

O: Yes. We formed a crew here and we flew together for practice missions around and then from there we went to England.

T: So your crew was formed here, officers and enlisted men?

O: Yes.

T: How large was the crew?

O: There were three, four officers. There were the pilot, the copilot, the navigator and the bombardier. Then there were five of the enlisted men. There were the engineer, the top turret, the ball turret, two waist gunners and myself. I was six.

T: That's a crew of ten then.

O: Ten, yes.

T: You flew together. What can you say about how the crew got along together?

O: We got along. I don't know how other crews did, but we seemed to mesh real nice. We all got along. We knew our jobs and we seemed to enjoy each other. There were no problems.

T: What's the secret to a successful crew in your opinion?

O: I don't know. I think you have to kind of learn to get along and to do your job and not be ornery or try to show yourself as somebody bigger than the next guy. Or try to be bossy or something. If you just get along and work together things will come out better.

T: So the enlisted guys, you felt there was a pretty good working relationship. Officers, too?

O: Yes.

T: By the time you were flying B-17s you knew that you were headed for Europe, right?

O: Yes.

T: You knew that you'd be part of the war effort against Germany. At this point in time how did you or what did you think about Germany or the Germans?

O: I don't know. What you hear about them and why they were doing it was kind of uncalled for. If putting a deal on individuals I couldn't say anything. Just on what you hear. It's kind of hard to say somebody is rotten or no good without knowing.

T: Did your feeling on that change during the war when you were flying combat missions? Did that change at all?

O: No it never changed. If I had gotten in closer, if we had more action, if we had more fighters try to get at us it probably would have changed my feelings a lot more, but it seemed like we had enough protection and they took care of us so we could go drop [our bombs] and come back home, and no problems.

T: That's interesting how because you didn't have a lot of heavy combat that maybe didn't change your opinion. That's interesting.

O: Not only that, but I think that, I don't know what happened to all the ground fire but we never had enough of that to really scare us out either.

T: The flak from the ground?

O: Yes.

(1, A, 330)

T: I'll come back to that in a minute. Your crew together took the ocean liner *Ile de France* over to England, is that right?

O: Yes. We were all on that. It was comfortable. There was no, it was supposed to be a luxury liner, but all the luxury had been stripped off. *(laughs)* We were, I think we were about four days out, and all of a sudden there was a loud *kabang*! right on the side of the ship. We all went topside and here was a destroyer right out alongside. He was dropping ash cans [depth charges] and evidently he must have thought there was a submarine or something in the area. Other than that it was an enjoyable mission.

T: You say no luxury. What kind of quarters did you have on board that ship?

O: They had regular rooms, and instead of having fancy beds it was all army cots. Then when we went to lunch, to mess, it was just like a mess hall. There were rooms. You weren't crowded or anything like that. We were able to go, being on B Deck, we weren't that far. We could get out and get up and go out and get a breath of fresh air.

T: Some of the fellows were further down?

O: Oh, yes. They had, I think there were either three or four decks below us that were infantry.

T: You felt yourself to be in a pretty good spot on the ship there.

O: Yes, real good.

T: Were there problems with guys getting seasick on board the ship?

O: Not a bit. Not a bit. I was used to being up on the lake. We were on the water all the time. On that liner you didn't get the bounce and the wave and the shaking. The thing was so big that I don't think it moved that much. I think a lot of that being

seasick is in the mind, too. You're afraid of the water, or afraid something is going to happen.

T: And it does.

O: Yes. *(laughs)*

T: Ossie, you landed in England, or in Scotland actually you said, and then you took a troop train down to London.

O: Boy, I'll tell you, did you ever take a train when you were in England?

T: Many times, yes.

O: Oh, my God, they fly! Holy man! That's just a tight connection and the caboose moves with the cab, with the engine, and boy, I tell you, they fly! I don't know how they stay on the rails sometimes.

(1, A, 365)

T: Did you enjoy the train trip?

O: Yes. It was scenic.

T: You went from Scotland to your base by London in a day or so you said.

O: Yes.

T: And where was your base? The base that you went to in England.

O: North of London. I just for the life of me can't put a name with it.

T: Your base north of London, was it a large base or a rather small one?

O: I wouldn't say it was real large, no. It was big enough to handle bombers. We had a couple squadrons of them there.

T: So you got in there, and you were a replacement crew? Is that what you were doing there?

O: We never saw them, but I suppose they were gone before we got there. There was space available for us in the barracks, so they must have.

T: What can you say about life on this base?

O: I didn't have any problems. The food, I don't think, was all that good. I think they had some Limey cooks and they don't make food like the Americans did. It was a different way of cooking. Other than that. We were able to go to town. We went into London a few times.

T: What was your impression of London?

O: I just walked. I didn't dare go too far because I was afraid of getting mixed up and not being able to find my way. I wasn't really impressed that much of it.

T: Come into contact with any local civilians at all?

O: No.

End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 385.

T: Again, did you come into contact with any civilians while you were there?

O: Not a one. Not a one. They didn't seem to want to make contact. They didn't come up and talk to you or anything.

T: By the time you arrived in England it was April of 1945. So for the English there had been Americans in the country for several years. It was nothing new to see a Yank in uniform for them.

O: Yes.

T: When you went to town, did you go with other American enlisted guys?

O: There were two of us. The ball turret and I used to go in once in a while, but it wasn't that often.

T: When you didn't go to town, how did you kill time on base when you had spare time?

O: It seemed like it was more reading or walking around. There wasn't really that much to do on the base. They didn't have any athletic sports or anything like that you could do. Probably sleep.

T: Just sort of kill time.

O: Yes.

T: Did guys play cards and stuff like that?

O: Not too much, no.

T: What about when you were on base or off base, was there a lot of drinking?

O: No. Not in our group there wasn't.

T: Did you observe consumption of alcohol being a problem in the military either in the States or over there in England?

O: Not during the time I was in there. We never had any problems. I know there was never anybody that had it in the barracks or anything like that. I don't remember anyone coming back from leave that was intoxicated. I don't really think it was a problem back then.

T: Let me ask you this: When you were in the service, the service was still segregated. Did you witness or observe contact between blacks and whites for example in the service while you were in the military?

O: Oh, now that you mention it I don't remember any colored in our unit. I don't know if that's because it was the Air Corps or whether they segregated or what but there were none in ours. If there was, there was no problem.

T: Any blacks as ground crew or maintenance people or cooks or things like that?

O: I don't remember seeing any.

T: How about Hispanics or Native Americans?

O: I know our crew and all the crews that we were housed with were all Americans, English.

T: Was it your navigator that was Jewish you mentioned?

O: Yes.

T: How about being Jewish. Was that something that made him stand out or other people felt funny about him or not?

O: No. He was a real nice fella. Jesse Eisenberg. That's Jewish.

T: The name, yes.

O: Yes. But no, we were always good friends with him. We got along on the plane and he taught me different things.

T: As navigator, was he enlisted or an officer?

O: He was an officer.

T: Was most of the crew about your age?

O: The pilot and copilot were, I'd say they had to be in their thirties.

T: They were a number of years older than you then.

O: Yes.

T: You were twenty.

O: Yes. The bombardier was older. The fact is, I'd say they were all at least ten or twelve years older than me, maybe more.

T: The officers.

O: Yes.

T: How about the enlisted men?

O: We were all pretty much within a year or two.

T: So nineteen, twenty or twenty-one.

O: Yes.

T: So there was an age difference then between the four officers and these six enlisted guys.

O: Yes, I can imagine there would be. They gotta have officers' training plus the pilots have to have pilot training. The same thing with the engineer and all that. They have to have special training. The pilot was really a nice fella, too. He insisted that we all be able to land the airplane. He took us, every time we were up, and fly copilot. Like if it was my turn, I would fly copilot. And we'd get up above the cloud level so the clouds were just level on top, and then you'd learn to be able to throttle back and just bring the plane down on top of that cloud level.

T: Almost a real practice landing in a sense.

O: Yes. Just like bringing it in on a practice landing. We kept practicing that so if something happened, if he got wounded or something where he couldn't fly, then one of us could at least bring it in.

T: How did that make you feel realizing oh, my gosh, I'm learning this because I might actually have to do it?

O: It was kind of a thrill to learn how to do it.

T: In the copilot seat. That's got to be pretty neat.

O: Yes.

T: How would you describe the relationship between the officers and the enlisted men? And there was an age difference and there's an officer-enlisted thing going on here.

(1, B, 497)

O: I don't know. They didn't show any superiority or bossiness or anything. Each one knew his job and he took care of it and got along real well.

T: Off duty, was there much mixing between officers and enlisted men?

O: No. The officers had their own quarters and the enlisted men were separated.

T: So it was an on-the-job relationship?

O: Yes.

T: But one that you think was pretty positive?

O: Yes.

T: Do you remember your first mission flying from England?

O: It didn't make an impression I guess because I don't remember anything that stands out. Not really. I know I partially remember trying to see where we were dropping the bombs, but I couldn't even see that from where I was sitting. I couldn't tell when he let them go.

T: You could see after release where they had gone down?

O: Yes. After we got beyond it, yes. But being able to distinguish what they were, what it was we dropped them on, I couldn't tell.

T: Could you estimate on how many missions you actually dropped bombs?

O: Probably about half of them.

T: And the other half, what about those?

O: Dropped them in the ocean. Because they won't let you land the plane with a load of bombs on it. If the gear would go, the landing gear would fail and you'd nose down, the bombs would explode and probably take half the airport with it. With all the bombs in there, all it takes is one to go off and that will discharge the whole pile.

T: Let me ask the next question: Why would you be coming back with bombs if you left with them?

O: The ground troops, that was a problem. The ground troops were moving faster than anticipated. When they got more in there and the Germans were backing up or running and then the ground troops were moving up and right close to the target area, so you didn't dare. If we had been off a little on our target site, we would have hit our own men. That wouldn't have been very good.

T: So you rather scrub the mission than drop them?

O: Rather than take a chance, yes.

T: So if you took off with bombs and the mission was cancelled, you'd have to turn around, drop the bombs in the ocean somewhere, and then land empty.

O: Yes.

(1, B, 544)

T: And that happened more than once, you said.

O: Oh, yes.

T: You got there, your discharge papers show that you arrived in England the 14th of April 1945. So the war was over by the 8th of May. That's about three or four weeks. Were you flying pretty regularly?

O: Yes. It was either every day, or every other day.

T: So you had a number of times that you actually flew over Germany, and maybe you dropped your bombs and maybe you didn't.

O: Yes.

T: Ossie, is there one particular mission that sticks out in your mind that you remember for some reason?

O: There was nothing real outstanding. Not that I can think of. They were all pretty much routine until you got to the point where you either let them go or turned around and went home.

T: When a mission was announced, can you describe on tape the preparation? What did you do from when you heard there is a mission to when you actually took off in the plane? What steps were there before you actually took off in the plane?

O: I would have to make sure my guns were clean and operable, and then make sure that my ammunition racks were loaded to capacity.

T: Did you load or did someone load them for you?

O: I had to have someone load them. They had to bring them in. But I had to check them and make sure that they hadn't forgotten to put some in there.

T: So you did a visual check, and you did a mechanical check of your guns.

O: Yes.

T: How long before take off was that typically?

O: Probably a half an hour at the most. You had your heated suit on and actually while your intercom and that was hooked, you could just plug that in, but that was about all we needed to do. The oxygen was right there all the time. There was a mask to put on and take off. That's all we had to do. There was no real cumbersome amount of equipment on you.

T: Did you carry a parachute with you?

O: Oh, yes.

T: Did you have a sidearm with you?

O: A .45 [caliber pistol]. I was issued that.

T: Did you carry it with you?

O: Yes. It was assigned to me. Then I had a parachute that had to be a backpack. It had to be on the back, because when I sat at the guns I couldn't have a chest pack. I had to reach around. There wouldn't be enough room there. Other than that.

T: So you checked your guns and then put on your chute, and then you were actually in the tail gunner seat when the plane took off?

O: Yes.

T: So you could see out the back window.

O: Yes.

T: Did you usually fly in formation across the English Channel?

O: Yes.

T: You could look down and see different things, couldn't you?

O: Yes.

T: On these missions over there was a lot of dead time flying over and flying back, right? How do you kill time by yourself back there?

O: Looking and watching. Just looking and watching to make sure that there's nobody trying to get at you. That's part of the deal back there. Nobody else can see out back, other than the top turret, he's the only other one that can see to the back. If there's planes coming or enemy or something, part of my job was to alert everybody if I see something.

T: So it's an important job back there. You were the first person to see behind really.

O: Yes.
T: Did you see enemy planes at times?

O: I saw planes come and I alerted everybody, but they turned out to be our own. It was our protection. They were scouting the area I suppose.

T: By late April 1945 Allied air force pretty much owned the skies.

O: We had control of it.

T: Was there a time when there was flak or ground fire at your plane?

O: Not while we were there. I never received any at all.

T: What was, in your opinion, the most difficult mission that you were a part of?

O: I don't think any of them were real difficult. They were all about the same. It's just the time, the experience of flying over and coming back and getting rid of the bombs. Just the time element. It gets a little boring sometimes. Doing the same route every day. We'd fly over France and then circle around and go up into Germany. Depending upon where the target area was.

(1, B, 626)

T: Typically with how many other bombers were you flying?

O: I think there were usually five or six in our group formation.

T: Then other groups as well in a larger pattern?

O: Yes, depending upon how big an area they were going to bomb at the time. You could cover a pretty good area with five, if you have a building or if you have a group of soldiers or something. You can cover a pretty good area.

T: Your plane carried how many bombs, how many pounds?

O: I don't really know. I didn't have anything to do with that.

T: All the ordnance was loaded by somebody else.

O: Yes.

T: What about on an elementary level, what about eating on the plane?

O: Never ate.

T: No food on the plane? Could you take a thermos of coffee or something like that?

O: No.

T: No meals on board?

O: No.

T: How about going to the bathroom on the plane?

O: I never experienced having to go.

T: Luckily the missions were short enough, so that it wasn't a problem.

O: Yes.

T: Let me ask you this: How did you stay in touch with family and loved ones back home when you either in the States or overseas?

O: I used to write. They had those speed letters, what the heck did they call them?

T: The V-mail?

O: Whatever they had you could write. Short letters. It was faster.

T: Were you a regular letter writer?

O: After I met the wife and started getting serious I was pretty regular.

T: When did you meet her? Was that after high school when you were in St. Paul?

O: Yes.

T: So when you went overseas you both knew each other already?

O: Yes.

T: Did she write to you regularly?

O: Oh, yes. I didn't move around that much. Once I got an address in England that stayed pretty good.

(1, B, 654)

T: You didn't move to another base at all, did you?

O: No.

T: That's unusual. So you got letters. How important was it to you to get letters from home?

O: It's kind of hard to think back now but I think, when I think back, I think I enjoyed having something in the mailbox when I got there. Hearing that everybody here was all right. My folks, I used to hear from my mother. Not that often, but she used to write to me.

T: So your mom was writing to you and your future wife was writing to you. Now your brother was in the service by now, right?

O: Yes, but I didn't have any connection with him. I didn't really know where he was.

T: Was he in the Pacific or in Europe?

O: I don't really know. I had an argument with my wife [before you arrived about this matter]. I didn't think he was even in the service.

T: But he was, as it turns out.

O: Evidently. She said he was.

T: Did he live in Warroad?

O: No, he lived here in St. Paul. When he graduated he came to St. Paul, too. He got married and was living here.

T: So after the war he was in St. Paul as well?

O: Yes.

T: Ossie, how did you get news when you were over there? Did you have radio or the Army paper *Stars and Stripes* or local papers?

O: That's a good one. I don't even remember. I know I didn't have a radio. I don't think *Stars and Stripes* was even published then.

T: They did publish some issues during the war, but not all bases had access to papers.

O: I don't remember it. I don't remember how we got any news.

T: It looks like from your discharge papers you were at sea on the *Ile de France* heading for Europe when President Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945. I'm wondering if you remember how you reacted when you first heard the news that the president had died?

O: Now that you mention it I don't remember that there was any communication at all on that. I don't remember hearing a thing on that.

T: Once you did realize that the president had died, what kind of feelings did you have about that?

O: I don't think I had any mixed feelings. I think it was like the rest of them. You feel a little remorse for him. He was a wonderful man, but there wasn't much we could do about it. Just put things straight the way he wanted them.

T: It wasn't long after that, it was May 8, 1945, that the war against Germany ended. You were in England at that time. What do you remember about V-E Day?

O: We weren't allowed off the base. It was just, whatever you did in the barracks that was it.

T: Why weren't you allowed off the base?

O: I think they were afraid of people hitting the bars and getting out of… raising hell and not paying attention to what they're doing.

T: So your base people were locked on base in a sense?

O: Yes.

T: How did people react on your base?

O: There were no wild expressions, but everybody was going around with a big smile on their face.

T: How about you?

O: Yes. I was anxious to get going and get home.

T: So for you, the news about the end of the war meant, now I can go home.

O: Yes.

T: As it turned out it was a couple of months before you left. It wasn't until the middle of August that you actually left England. You were three months in England with no combat missions to fly. How did you kill that time over in England?

O: We went to town once in a while, but other than that it was all spent on the base, just dead time. There was nothing we could do about it. There wasn't any enjoyment. It's hard to think back exactly to what we did do.

T: Not very much, it sounds like.

O: No.

T: You were anxious to get going, and it sounds like other guys were starting to rotate back to the States. Were you one of these guys that considered making the military a career?

O: No.

T: You answered that one pretty quickly. What was it about the service for you that said this is enough?

O: Actually it's having too many officers above you. You have to answer to too many to be able to do something and being an underdog unless you really get built up with an armload of stripes or bars on your shoulder, why you don't have much to say.

T: You're kind of low on the totem pole.

O: Yes.

T: And what was your rank when you were discharged?

O: Sergeant.

T: So you were low on the totem pole.

O: Yes.

T: Ultimately you did get to come home. It was the middle of August 1945. You talked a little bit before we started to tape about how you got back to the States. I'm wondering if you could talk about that while we're here.

(1, B, 722)

O: We flew war wearies [planes with many missions] back. They were B-17s, still capable of flying real well. There was a group of seven or eight of us at the time. At that time we were, our crew, we were the last crew to take off. We were all heading for a base in Canada.

T: You were with your crew that you had flown your missions with?

O: Yes. Our crew. They were all regular crews. We took off last, and our navigator rigged up a thing on my tail guns so that I could work out and give him the wind drift. And about every half hour or so he would call me and ask me for a wind drift, and then he would calculate that into the speed and whatever. How he did it I don't know, but he knew how to do it. We wound up landing in Canada. We were there. We had landed.

Then we were assigned to a barracks. We had lunch and we were ready for bed when the first plane of the rest of them started coming in. That's how sharp our navigator was. He really knew how to calculate everything. And not only get you in there ahead of everybody, but you're flying less mileage. You go in a straight line instead of weaving and wandering all over the ocean. Because you're out there in the ocean and looking down you can't tell if you're moving or doing anything. It's just all water.

T: Was that a little disconcerting, looking down and seeing nothing but water?

O: Yes. You begin to wonder.

T: One thing I forgot to ask you. You were still in England when the war against Japan ended, the war as a whole. What can you remember about V-J Day, August 15, 1945? That was right when you were leaving England.

O: I don't remember a thing. I don't remember any big doings going on or celebrations. Even in the barracks, a little smiley but nothing wild or anything.

T: These B-17 crews, all of you guys, were not slated to go to the Pacific, were you?

O: No.

T: So for you guys the big deal was the end of the war in Europe. That was it. You knew you were going back to the States anyway.

O: Yes.

T: That was different than some other guys who were slated to go to the Pacific, right?

O: Yes.

T: You got back to the States in August, yet you were not discharged until January of 1946. We're talking a lot more months again. What did you do?

O: I don't know what we did, to tell you the truth. Waited, I guess.

T: You were out in Santa Anna, California, is that right?

O: Yes. But I had… They gave us a leave when we came back. I think it was two or three weeks. I came home.

T: Back to St. Paul here?

O: Yes. Then went back there and killed time.

T: You got discharged then, was it in January or were you home by Christmas?

O: No, it was January 29, 1946.

T: So you had a number of months to kill just waiting to be discharged.

O: Yes.

T: Once again, were you flying any practice missions?

O: No.

T: Let me ask you this. When you got back to St. Paul, it was early 1946 and you're out of uniform and you're a civilian again. What was your initial reaction to being out of the military?

O: I think my first concern was getting a job. Getting something to be able to eat and pay the rent. That's why I applied for government help.

T: The 52-20 benefits for ex-soldiers?

O: Yes. I got that, and then I was able to go to school, and then I got a nice job

End of Tape 1. Tape 2, Side A begins at counter 000.

T: You got back and you came to St. Paul when you got discharged. Was it hard to find a job when you first got back?

O: Not really. Not really. I got into cabinet making. I was going to school and then got into cabinet making. Then I got partly, for a while, into pattern making. Then that died out and I went back into the cabinet business again. That's when I wound up being a manager and then buying a business, so things moved pretty well.

T: You got married in June of '46?

O: Yes.

T: When you got married were you going to school or working by that time?

O: I was going to school and working. The fact is, after we got married I was working two jobs.

T: By choice or by necessity?

O: By necessity. It was to make ends meet and try to put some money away to buy a house. I didn't have any problems. I enjoyed it. Enjoyed the jobs.

T: Did you, when you and Millie first got married, was it easy or hard to find an apartment?

O: We lived with my wife's folks when we first got married. Until we were able to buy a house.

T: When you bought this place here, at 1398 Blair [in St. Paul]?

O: Yes.

T: And you've been in this house for how many years now?

O: It will be fifty years.

T: So early 1950s you moved in here. You lived with your wife's folks for a number of years?

O: Yes, and then I bought this place, and we had her folks here.

T: So the same arrangement, different location.

O: Yes.

T: Instead of you living with them, they lived with you. How was that living with your in-laws?

O: We didn't have any problem with it. It worked out nice because in the later years her mother got frail and feeble and she had asthma and hay fever, and so Millie was able to take care of her.

T: So it was convenient.

O: Yes.

(2, A, 48)

T: It sounds like after the war, for you and Millie it was convenient because you didn't have to pay rent or find an apartment.

O: The fact was we helped to pay the rent over there. We contributed.

T: Oh, sure, but not like having to pay rent on an apartment somewhere.

O: No. No.

T: About being a civilian again, what was the hardest thing do you think for you, adjusting to being a civilian?

O: I can't remember anything being that hard. I seemed to blend right in I guess. I didn't have any problems.

T: You lived a military life for several years. Suddenly the uniform comes off and you're in civilian clothes. What did you find easy?

O: I think the easiest thing was to go and do what you wanted to do when you wanted to do it. You don't have to get permission. You just come and go as you dang feel like it.

T: Ossie, when you were in the service, in England, what did the war mean for you personally? What was it all about, in a larger sense?

O: Boy, I don't really remember having any feelings about it at all. Whether I was disgusted or mad at somebody. I didn't have any personal feelings at all that I remember.

T: Let me put it this way, did you feel as a person in uniform you were more helping to fix the world in a larger sense or were you just doing your job?

O: I think I felt more like I was doing a job. Like I had a position and I had to do it and that was…

T: As opposed to being a person who was saving the world for…?

O: Yes.

T: How do you reflect on that now? I mean, sixty years later, now what did the war mean for you?

O: Oh, I'm glad we did what we did because if it would… if Hitler would have won the thing we'd have been in a lot different status. Dictatorship. No way.

T: How do you reflect on the war now when you think about what it was about and what you're part in it was?

O: I didn't contribute an awful lot to it. I tried to do my part. I think that I'm glad that we were able to come out ahead, and there wasn't that many losses on our side. I think it came out real good rather than being a loser and being under a dictator. That would have been a tough thing to take.

T: What's the most important way that the war changed your life?

O: Oh, boy. I don't know if it changed my life. Boy. I didn't learn anything in the service that I could use for business or for making a living afterwards. As far as that goes, it didn't change anything. I suppose that it maybe gave me a better feeling of how to get along with other people, and how to behave myself.

T: The job of being a gunner is not a skill you can take to civilian life.

O: No. *(both laugh)*

T: I can't think of the employer that would value that skill.

Wife: I would say that you thank your blessings as went through it. A friend of mine from up north, I think he was in the same time and the same place as Ossie. He was also a tail gunner. When he got back he was dead. He was dead. In the back because the enemy crossfired and shot him.

T: Ossie, think about your time when you were in England and I'll ask you to talk about one experience or one story that for you best symbolizes your time in England. An anecdote or an experience that you had.

O: It's terrible you know. It's just like I have a total blank. I can't, I don't remember any going to town, or any experiences in London. Like I said, the only thing really remember was taking the train from the boat, and the train the way it flew. That impressed me but nothing else seems to really leave a mark on me.

T: That's interesting. Anything else you want to add before we conclude. Something else…?

O: I think I've done more than I should have already.

T: Thanks very much.

END OF INTERVIEW